Appendix 5(2): Did the Reagan Team Understand How Serious the Soviet Economic Problem Was?

In the text, the political scientist Michael Nacht was quoted as saying that the Reagan people turned a blind eye to the Soviet economic problem. "Any kind of study showing the Soviet Union was an economic basket case," he said, "would have been shelved. It didn't comport with the overarching view of a communist threat."[1] When he made that comment Nacht was already a prominent figure in the security studies field. He was at that time dean of the School of Public Affairs at the University of Maryland and had previously worked for a number of years as associate director of the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He had already published a good deal on national security issues, and after 1992 his career continued to prosper. After leaving Maryland he was made dean of the School of Public Policy at Berkeley, where he also worked as a professor, and went on to hold various high-level government positions under Clinton and Obama. His curriculum vitae is available online (link).

The idea that the Reagan administration as a whole, except perhaps for the president himself, did not believe that the USSR's economic problems were very serious persists in the historical literature. See, for example, Beth Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism: Rethinking President Reagan's Cold War Legacy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2020) (link), pp. 49-50: "Casey and Gates were not the only administration officials who considered the Soviet Union to be a strong and enduring adversary. In the early 1980s most of Reagan's advisers shared this view. For them, it was unfathomable that the Soviet Union—the great superpower—would not be able to overcome its economic problems."

But claims of that sort are simply not supported by the evidence. As I showed in the text, top officials actually used the term "economic basket case" when dealing with this issue. And George Shultz, Secretary of State for most of the Reagan period, quotes himself in his memoirs as saying in 1979: "The Soviet system is incompetent and cannot survive."[2]

[1] Quoted in Rodman Griffin, "The New CIA," *CQ Researcher* 2, no. 46 (December 11, 1992) (link).

[2] George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993) (link), p. 6; see also p. 10.